

## The Listener-in-Chief: Final Thoughts from the *JME* Editor Travis L. Martin

As planned, I've dedicated the time immediately following my review of the last page for writing my reflection. I want to convey the feelings that are on hand having just finished and, hopefully, connect with readers who, having also just finished, stumble upon this page in the same frame of mind. So what did you think? I know, as the editor, I am probably a bit biased. But, quite honestly, my first thought was "Wow! This book is amazing." And I think I am being fair. I did hit the backspace key a few times after writing "This is the best book ever. Period." That was originally my *first* line. But what was it about this *JME* that left its editor so proud?

Certainly, I had to fight back the tears more than once while reading the short stories. I also laughed, found myself humbled and, time and time again, was reinvigorated to keep working—ceaselessly, it seemed—when each story left its unique mark upon me. I've been moved by the flow and precision of the lines of verse. I was flat-out blown away by the imagery. And, when I finally made it through the scholarly section, I was intrigued in an "awesome, other people out there are interested in the same kinds of research and issues as I am" kind of way. I was excited at the prospect of continued conversations concerning the issues presented in both creative and scholarly form.

I was impressed: The hours upon hours upon hours of work put into this book by the editors is beyond measure. They've continuously moved me with their passion for helping vets find a voice and a chance to express themselves on their own terms. Keep in mind, they don't get paid. You'd think it would be hard to get much work out of people who have jobs, attend classes, teach, raise families,

and do any number of things in addition to helping produce the fine works you just read. But that hasn't been my experience. The *JME* editors have remained dedicated to the cause throughout the year-long journey involved in its making. And I, as well as the authors and artists contained herein, thank them from the bottom of our hearts.

To me, if any common thread stood out, it was this: The creative authors, artists, and scholars all hint at the act of listening. Of course, it's important not to confuse listening with understanding. The latter is almost always a futile attempt to walk a day in the shoes—or boots—of someone else, applying past circumstances or experiences to something or someone else, usually to one's own life. Understanding is fraught with pitfalls: limited reference points for the details, a lack of common experience and, on some level, an attempt to convert a given story, poem, or work of art into a palpable lesson. Why does creativity and introspection have to be boiled down and dissected? Why must it become something *we* can use? Why is it all about *us*?

The more I work with the *JME*, the more I realize that it's not about me. I may have served in the military; I may have even served in the same places and during the same times as some of our contributors; but their wars—their fights, struggles, lessons, and experiences—are certainly not my own. Sure, at some level I seek to *understand* the works myself. But when working with the *JME* I've had to, on some levels, suppress that scholarly instinct and stay focused on the contributors themselves. Part of our mission is to allow our authors and artists to educate the public about the nature and consequence of military service. So don't feel bad if you find yourself on a journey of understanding. Just remember that *understanding* will always be a secondary mission for the *JME*.

I've learned what may be quite simple to others: Each line in this book—apart from this outro and my own, profanity-laced story about burning feces in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom—belongs to someone else. My role, what I hope you will see as the true value of the *JME*, is simply to listen, to help others reach into

their pasts and stake claim to their experiences. If we can continue to be that blank page or canvas upon which authors and artists explore those experiences—if we can truly *listen* for the sake of others instead of ourselves—then, in my view, the *JME* will be a success for years to come. I'll conclude by simply saying, "Thank You." Thanks to our authors and artists for sharing their works, for trusting us enough to allow us the privilege of listening. It has been an honor to serve you.